



NEWS RELEASE

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André Birotte Jr.

United States Attorney
Central District of California

Thom Mrozek, Public Affairs Officer
(213) 894-6947
thom.mrozek@usdoj.gov
www.justice.gov/usao/cac

JAPANESE NATIONALS ARRESTED ON CHARGES OF SMUGGLING TURTLES AND TORTOISES FROM JAPAN INTO THE UNITED STATES

LOS ANGELES – Two Japanese nationals have been arrested on federal animal smuggling charges at Los Angeles International Airport after they allegedly brought into the United States approximately 55 live turtles and tortoises that were concealed in snack food boxes discovered in a suitcase.

Atsushi Yamagami, 39, and Norihide Ushirozako, 49, both Japanese citizens who are believed to reside in Osaka, were arrested without incident early Friday morning by special agents with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Yamagami and Ushirozako are charged in a two-count criminal complaint filed this morning that alleges one count of illegally importing wildlife into the United States, a smuggling offense that carries a statutory maximum penalty of 20 years in federal prison, and one count of violating the Endangered Species Act, a misdemeanor that carries a statutory maximum penalty of one year in prison.

At their initial court appearances this afternoon in United States District Court, both Yamagami and Ushirozako were ordered detained without bond. An arraignment in the case has been scheduled for January 31.

The case against Yamagami and Ushirozako is the result of an undercover investigation that started one year ago when U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents obtained information about a smuggling operation that was illegally bringing turtles into the United States. In July 2010, agents infiltrated the smuggling ring and purchased approximately 10 protected turtles and tortoises from a person linked to Yamagami and

Ushirozako. The turtles and tortoises purchased in the undercover operation were all species protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international treaty that protects species being threatened by international trade. Species protected under CITES can legally traded only if the exporting country issues a permit.

In August 2010, Hiroki Uetsuki, an associate of Yamagami and Ushirozako, traveled from Osaka, Japan and arrived at Honolulu International Airport. Customs and Border Protection Officers discovered approximately 42 CITES-protected turtles and tortoises hidden in Uetsuki's checked luggage. After U.S. Fish and Wildlife agents arrested Uetsuki, he informed the agents that Yamagami paid him approximately 100,000 yen (approximately \$1,200) and his travel expenses to smuggle turtles and tortoises into the United States. Uetsuki pleaded guilty in federal court in Hawaii to a smuggling charge and is scheduled to be sentenced on February 7.

"Individuals who engage in the smuggling of protected species are unscrupulous law violators who are motivated solely by profit and status, and clearly have no respect for our ecosystem," said Erin L. Dean, Resident Agent in Charge of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Law Enforcement. "Individuals who participate in the illegal take and trade of protected animals are irreparably harming natural populations and, sadly, contributing to the decline of many types of fragile and delicate species worldwide. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will diligently pursue those individuals who profit from their involvement in the illegal wildlife trade."

The charges contained in the criminal complaint are merely accusations and the defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty in court.

Operation Flying Turtle was conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which received substantial assistance from the United States Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

"The plundering and smuggling of rare plants and animals to satisfy the desires of hobbyists is not only shameful, in some circumstances it can pose a threat to public safety and the environment," said Claude Arnold, Special Agent in Charge for ICE's Homeland Security Investigations in Los Angeles. "ICE's Homeland Security

Investigations will continue working closely with its federal law enforcement counterparts not only to identify those involved with this type of trafficking, but to seize the assets and profits generated by their illegal activities.”

CONTACT: Assistant United States Attorney Dennis Mitchell
Environmental Crimes Section
(213) 894-2484

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